

Studies in Scottish Literature

Volume 38 | Issue 1

Article 8

2012

SCOTTISH LITERATURE AND "ENGL. LIT."

Leith Davis

Simon Fraser University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/ssl>



Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Davis, Leith (2012) "SCOTTISH LITERATURE AND "ENGL. LIT."," *Studies in Scottish Literature*: Vol. 38: Iss. 1, 20–27.

Available at: <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/ssl/vol38/iss1/8>

This Symposium is brought to you by the Scottish Literature Collections at Scholar Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Studies in Scottish Literature by an authorized editor of Scholar Commons. For more information, please contact dillarda@mailbox.sc.edu.

SCOTTISH LITERATURE AND “ENGL.LIT”

Leith Davis

Scottish Studies has come a long way since the inaugural issue of *Studies in Scottish Literature* back in July, 1963. Several other essays in this volume revisit critical stages of that journey, focusing on the establishment of Scottish literature at the institutional level and on early debates within the field about its self-perception. In joining this discussion, I would like to focus my contribution on how the landscape of English literary studies (“Engl. Lit.”) has altered in such a way as to encourage attention to the matter of Scotland.¹ While certain Scottish writers (like Walter Scott) have enjoyed varying degrees of attention in the development of an established (although somewhat fluid) canon of literature in English, Scottish literature as a subject *per se* has been beyond the purview of scholars of English Literature until the last few decades. A good indication of the change in Scottish literature’s position is the appearance of discussions of Scottish literary works *within their Scottish contexts* in general “Engl. Lit.” journals. Where articles on James Macpherson, Alan Ramsay, and Robert Burns might previously have come to the public eye only in specialized publications like this one, they now regularly appear in journals such as *Modern Language Quarterly*, *Publications of the Modern Language Association* and the *Review of English Studies*.² At the same time, monographs focusing on aspects of

¹ I take the term “Engl. Lit” to refer to the institution that has built up around the teaching of canonical texts in English literature. There are, of course, many works that address both the term and the institution. See, for example, John Kerrigan, “Introduction,” *Archipelagic English: Literature, History and Politics, 1603-1707* (Oxford UP, 2008), 1-90 and, for a specifically Scottish consideration of the issue, Berthold Schoene-Harwood, “Introduction: Post-devolution Scottish Writing” in *The Edinburgh Companion to Contemporary Scottish Literature* (Edinburgh UP, 2007), 1-6.

² See, for example, Steve Newman, “The Scots Songs of Allan Ramsay: ‘Lyrick’ Transformation, Popular Culture, and the Boundaries of the Scottish Enlightenment,” *Modern Language Quarterly* 63:3 (2002 Sept), 277-314; Ted

Scottish literature are also appearing more frequently from major academic presses.³ What factors have encouraged this sea-change and, more pointedly, where do we go from here? In the following remarks, I will trace several paths that have led to the present moment and suggest a productive direction forward for the field of Scottish literature.

While the notion of uncovering "roots" leading to specific origins is fraught with difficulties, it is possible to trace a number of different "routes" that have led up to the present moment. One such route would take us back to John Pocock's 1975 manifesto, "British History: A Plea for a New Subject."⁴ Pocock described the limited state of the field of British history at the time he was writing: "Instead of histories of Britain, we have, first of all, histories of England, in which Welsh, Scots, Irish, and, in the reign of George III, Americans appear as peripheral peoples when, and only when, their doings assume power to disturb the tenor of English politics; second, and read by limited and fragmented publics, histories of Wales, Scotland, Ireland, and so forth, written as separate enterprises in the effort, sustained to various degrees, to constitute separate historiographical traditions" (603-04). Pocock called for a "New British History" that would attend to the complex interplay between England and its peripheries and colonies. Pocock's influence can be seen in subsequent works of literary criticism that bring Scotland into focus within a British context. Katie Trumpener's *Bardic Nationalism: The Romantic Novel and the British Empire* (1997), for example, focused on the ways in which Irish and Scottish antiquaries in the eighteenth century "reconceive[d] national history and literary history under the sign of the bard" (xii), a sign that was then taken up and reworked by their English contemporaries and exported to the colonies. Murray Pittock's *Celtic Identity and the British Image* (1999) also attempted to analyze the unique role of Scotland and Scottish literature within the wider purview of the development of British national identity, while in *The Grammar of Empire in Eighteenth-Century British Writing* (2000), Janet Sorensen examined the linguistic complications involved in the production of a standard English language within the multi-lingual British Isles. Penny

Underwood, "Romantic Historicism and the Afterlife," *PMLA* 117:2 (March 2002), 237-51; and Jeremy J Smith, "Copia Verborum: The Linguistic Choices of Robert Burns," *Review of English Studies* 58:233 (Feb., 2007): 73-88.

³ See for example, Ian Duncan's *Scott's Shadow: The Novel In Romantic Edinburgh* (Princeton UP, 2007); Nigel Leask's *Robert Burns and Pastoral* (Oxford UP, 2010); and Juliet Shields' *Sentimental Literature and Anglo-Scottish Identity* (Cambridge UP, 2010).

⁴ J.G.A. Pocock, "British history: A Plea for a New Subject," *Journal of Modern History*, 47 (1975), 601-21; it originally appeared in *New Zealand Journal of History*, 8 (1974).

Fielding's *Writing and Orality: Nationality, Culture, and Nineteenth-Century Scottish Fiction* (1996), too, while deeply indebted to post-structuralist theory, also questioned the linguistic role of Scotland and Scottishness within Britain.⁵ Pocock's name continues to be cited in more recent works that adopt a "four nations" approach as such David Baker and Willy Malley's *British Identities and English Renaissance Literature* (2002), David Duff and Catherine Jones' *Scotland, Ireland and the Romantic Aesthetic* (2007) and John Kerrigan's *Archipelagic English: Literature, History and Politics, 1603-1707* (2008). An indication of the enduring value of Pocock's essay can be seen in the fact that it was republished in 2005 in his collection of essays, *The Discovery of Islands: Essays in British History*.⁶

A second "route" through which to trace the growing interest in Scottish literature by scholars in the wider field of English literature is connected to the political changes that have affected Scotland over the last several decades. In 1977, Tom Nairn's *The Break-up of Britain: Crisis and Neo-Nationalism* suggested a connection between the lack of a Scottish political voice after 1707 and a compensatory cultural identity expressed in Scottish literature. The results of the 1979 referendum rejecting a devolved Scottish assembly on the surface appeared to confirm Nairn's vision of a Scottish "Celtic cringe." In fact, the resentment caused by the handling of the question of the referendum planted the seeds that, watered by the next twenty years of Thatcherite policy, came to fruition in the 1997 vote to re-establish a Scottish Parliament. In between the two referenda, in the arena of literary criticism, Robert Crawford's *Devolving English Literature* (1992; rev. ed. 2000) and later *The Scottish Invention of English Literature* (1998) launched a powerful critique of the study of English literature, suggesting that it was a subject forged (sometimes in all senses of that word) by Scottish writers' negotiations with the dominant source of cultural power. It was a critique that made Engl. Lit. critics sit up and take notice. Subsequently, the post-devolutionary era has witnessed a plethora of critical investigations of the subject of Scottish literature, attempting to correct its previous marginalization within the larger field of English literature.⁷ By their sheer number if nothing else, such works work to

⁵ See Penny Fielding, *Writing and Orality: Nationality, Culture, and Nineteenth-Century Scottish Fiction* (Oxford University Press, 1996) and, more recently, *Scotland and the Fictions of Geography: North Britain 1760-1830* (Cambridge University Press, 2008).

⁶ J. G. A. Pocock, "British history: A Plea for a New Subject (1973-74)" in *The Discovery of Islands: Essays in British History* (Cambridge UP, 2005), 24-46.

build awareness of Scottish literature. Significantly, Scotland has its own national contribution to the numerous “history of the book” projects that have been produced in recent years.⁸

Connected to these investigations of the status of Scotland within a so-called United Britain, a third “route” leading to a focus on Scottish literature within the canon of English literature can be traced back to the growing interest in postcolonial theory in the academy. In particular, the perspectives offered by Edward Said, Homi Bhaba and other critics offered new theoretical possibilities for rethinking the relationship between Scotland, Ireland and England in terms of power struggles between hegemonic and subordinate groups. Michael Hechter’s *Internal Colonialism: The Celtic Fringe in British National Development* (1975) drew on such theoretical perspectives to consider the case of nations peripheral to England. Hechter’s work initiated a debate about the application of postcolonial theory in Scottish context, a debate that has turned—and continues to turn—largely on the interpretation of Scotland as a “colony” of England. Postcolonial critic and ex-SAQ editor Grant Farred’s 2004 “Wankerdorn: *Trainspotting* as a Rejection of the Postcolonial?” offers an example of such an interpretation, opening as it does with the assertion that, “Long before and long after the ‘enforced union’ of 1707, Scots from across the ideological spectrum have come to recognize that they are—despite occasional pretenses and denials to the contrary—a people ‘colonized’ by the English.”⁹ Liam Connell, on the other hand, has argued that to consider Scotland as a colony is to mistake discursive constructions for material circumstances: “In order to claim that Scotland was colonized, it is necessary to ignore . . . material indicators that suggest that, as a whole, Scotland benefitted greatly from the processes of modernization following the union with England, and, indeed, that these were processes over which Scots themselves exercised considerable control.”¹⁰ Connell’s assertion that the historical situation of

⁷ See, for examples, Ian Brown, Thomas Owen Clancy, Susan Manning and Murray Pittock, eds. *The Edinburgh History of Scottish Literature*, 3 vols. (Edinburgh University Press, 2007); Gerard Carruthers, *Scottish Literature* (Edinburgh University Press, 2009); Robert Crawford, *Scotland’s Books* (Penguin, 2008); Carla Sassi, *Why Scottish Literature Matters* (Saltire Society, 2005); and Roderick Watson’s revised two-volume edition of *The Literature of Scotland* (Palgrave, 2007).

⁸ Bill Bell, ed. *The Edinburgh History of the Book in Scotland* 4 vols. (Edinburgh UP, 2007-2013).

⁹ Grant Farred, “Wankerdorn: *Trainspotting* as a Rejection of the Postcolonial?” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 103.1 (2004): 215-26; 215.

¹⁰ Liam Connell, “Modes of Marginality: Scotland and the Uses of Postcolonial Theory” *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 23:1/2 (2003), 41-53; 45. Connell suggests, “the use of postcolonial theory in relation to Scottish literature forms a strategic effort to raise the profile of Scottish literary

Scotland is significantly different than that of Britain's external colonies is well-taken, although he is, perhaps, a little glib in his dismissal of other "material indicators" that suggest Scotland's economic and political subordination after the Union. After all, following the Union of 1707, Scotland, with a population half the size of England, was allotted a mere forty-five out of 558 seats in Parliament.¹¹ The exact nature of the relationship between Scottish studies and postcolonial studies continues to be the subject of debate. The recently published *Scottish Literature and Postcolonial Literature: Comparative Texts and Critical Perspectives* (Edinburgh UP, 2011), edited by Michael Gardiner, Graeme MacDonald and Niall O'Gallagher, takes up the question in a rich and nuanced manner. Critics interested in this perspective would do well to consider the proposition suggested by Theo Goldberg and Ato Quaysan in *Relocating Postcolonialism* (2004) for a "conceptual alliance between postcolonialist" and other kinds of studies.¹²

While the role of Scotland within Britain has come under increasing scrutiny for the reasons indicated above, literary scholars' increasing awareness of the impact of globalization in the present has encouraged new ways of examining the history of Britain within the wider world. In the context of eighteenth-century studies, for example, Felicity Nussbaum has introduced the concept of "critical global studies," whose aim is to "resituate eighteenth-century studies within a spatially and conceptually expanded paradigm" and "to spark more nuanced accounts of the relations among freshly juxtaposed regions, disciplines, and methodologies."¹³ Sharon Marcus describes a similar trajectory in Victorian Studies as it has shifted to "an increasingly expansive definition of . . . spatial territory by expanding out from the English nation into the United Kingdom and the British Empire."¹⁴ The effects of this outward

studies within the context of its institutional marginalization as an area of study within British and North American universities" (41). Connell echoes the comments of Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin who suggest that, "While it is possible to argue that these [Irish, Welsh, and Scottish] societies were the first victims of English expansion, their subsequent complicity in the British imperial enterprise makes it difficult for colonized peoples outside Britain to accept their identity as post-colonial" (*The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures* [Routledge, 1989; rev. ed. 2002], 31-2).

¹¹ On the specifics of the Union, see Christopher Whatley, *Scots and the Union* (Edinburgh UP, 2006).

¹² David Theo Goldberg and Ato Quaysan, "Introduction: Scale and Sensibility," *Relocating Postcolonialism* (2004), xvi.

¹³ Felicity Nussbaum, ed., "Introduction," *The Global Eighteenth Century* (Johns Hopkins UP, 2003), 1.

gaze can be fruitfully summarized in Kate Teltscher's remarks regarding "the emergence of a much less stable sense of European self; an identity that is shifting, various, and responsive to the demands of domestic politics and religious affiliation."¹⁵

As scholars like Suvir Kaul have noted, a homogeneous British national and imperial consciousness did not spring fully formed into being during the debate on the Union of 1707.¹⁶ It developed and was contested throughout the eighteenth century in conjunction with a number of extra-national events. Conversely, global concerns impacted the internal nations of the British Isles. "'Forging the nation' was . . . inextricably bound to transnational and colonial developments" as Kathleen Wilson suggests.¹⁷ Accordingly, a fourth route bringing the field of Scottish literature to a wider audience has been the focus on how the internal politics of Britain have mapped onto such global concerns, especially Britain's imperial propensities. In *Scottish Fiction and the British Empire* (2006), a book deeply indebted to Trumpener's argument, Douglas Mack describes how Scots benefited from the "British Imperial project": "Scots who wished to seize the opportunities offered by the British Empire had to learn how to operate acceptably and successfully within Britain's Imperial power structures. This learning process necessarily involved them in an adjustment to English cultural and linguistic norms, and in a consequent dilution of their own Scottish cultural identity."¹⁸ Where Mack divides Scottish responses to the workings of the British empire along class lines, with those closest to the "levers of Imperial power" experiencing a greater need to adjust to "British norms," Murray Pittock offers a more complicated vision in his description of Scottish (and Irish) "altermentalities." In the final chapter of *Scottish and Irish Romanticism* (2008), entitled "Fratrism: Sisters, Brothers, Empire, and its Limits in the Scottish and Irish Imagination, c. 1746-1837," Pittock discusses the manifestation of distinctly Scottish and Irish identities operating in the far regions of the British empire: "Despite the absence of a home state of their own, both maintained a distinctive

¹⁴ Sharon Marcus, "Same Difference: Transnationalism, Comparative Literature, and Victorian Studies," *Victorian Studies* 45/4 (2004): 677-686, 679.

¹⁵ Kate Teltscher, *India Inscribed: European and British Writing on India 1600-1800* (Oxford UP, 1995), 6.

¹⁶ See Suvir Kaul, "Introduction: Towards a Postcolonial History of Eighteenth-Century English Literature" (Edinburgh UP, 2009), 1-34.

¹⁷ Kathleen Wilson, ed. *A New Imperial History: Culture, Identity, and Modernity in Britain and the Empire, 1660-1840* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 10.

¹⁸ Douglas Mack, *Scottish Fiction and the British Empire* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006), 6.

sense of a Scottish or Irish self abroad, and particular ways of performing and promoting the community of such selfhood.”¹⁹ Kenneth McNeil’s *Scotland, Britain, Empire* (2007) has also contributed to the understanding of the relationship between the internal politics of the British archipelago and the external effects of empire. While Mack, Pittock and McNeil focus largely on the centripetal movement from the centre of empire outwards, the burgeoning field of transatlantic studies has offered scholars such as Susan Manning and Francis D. Cogliano a theoretical perspective that considers the role of Scotland in the context of flows of people, goods and ideas back and forth across the Atlantic.²⁰ Interestingly, much of this recent scholarly concern to consider Scotland in a global context brings us back to Pocock’s suggestion that a complete understanding of the state of Britain is only possible when we consider how varieties of Britishness are created and expressed abroad—in America, Canada and the Antipodes, for example.

The study of Scottish literature has indeed come a long way since 1963. Having traced four approaches that have led up to the present interest in Scottish literature by mainstream English literary critics (a “four nations” approach; literary devolution; postcolonialism; and globalization studies), the question that remains to be considered is “where do we go from here”? While it’s impossible to predict what the next 50 years will hold (will there even continue to be departments that teach literature?), my own sense is that in the immediate future, Scottish literature needs to be able continue its expansion in two different but complementary ways. First, it needs to continue to reassure itself of its identity as a national literature in its own right, one that is interconnected with the field of Engl. Lit. rather than marginalized within it. Such an epistemological confidence can lead to productive reconsiderations of how the canon of Scottish literature actually intersects with that of English literature. Many works of the Scottish canon have been studied in a limited Scottish context, as if to consider them alongside works from the English canon might somehow threaten their Scottish integrity. To give two examples from my own time period of the eighteenth century: Watson’s *Choice Collection of Comic and Serious Scots Verse* takes on new meaning when considered in the context of the developing genre of

¹⁹ Murray Pittock, *Scottish and Irish Romanticism* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2008), 235.

²⁰ See Susan Manning and Francis D. Cogliano, *The Atlantic Enlightenment* (Ashgate, 2008). See also Manning’s earlier work *Fragments of Union: Making Connections in Scottish and American Writing* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2002) and *The Puritan-Provincial Vision: Scottish and American Literature in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge UP, 1990).

the miscellany in England at the beginning of the eighteenth century. Similarly, our sense of Allan Ramsay's oeuvre also changes if we consider his English poetry and his connections with English cultural figures—Joseph Addison, Josiah Burchett and Alexander Pope, for instance.

Second, Scottish literature can benefit from further consideration of its transnational connections, including diasporic ones. Again, some particular examples. Much work remains to be done on the literary enterprises of Scots who worked for the East India Company—James Macpherson and Alexander Dow spring most readily to mind; the two lodged together in London in 1768, and Dow's *Tales Translated from the Persian of Inatulla of Delhi* bears a remarkable resemblance to Macpherson's *Fragments of Ancient Poetry*. At the same time, exploring diasporic connections can also yield new avenues for understanding Scottish literature. The construction of Robert Burns's reputation as the national poet of Scotland demands, for example, a close consideration of his transnational circulation by Scottish emigrants, while an examination of the poets Alexander McLachlan and John Greenleaf Whittier as, respectively, the “Burns of Canada” and the “Burns of the United States” suggests connections that cross but also put into question national borders. As the last example suggests, a transnational approach means not only exploring connections that confirm national boundaries, but also considering sites (local, global, glocal?) that put the idea of the nation into question by foregrounding other kinds of affiliations.

Indeed, there is much to be done in the area of Scottish literature. The future is bright for its increased appearance in all the appurtenances of “Engl. Lit.”—including (we pray) survey courses. Nevertheless, while it is gratifying to see the inclusion of Scottish topics in mainstream English literary journals, for example, it is also important that there remain a forum devoted exclusively to exploring the subject of Scottish literature in all its changing forms. Such a forum can be found in this journal.

Simon Fraser University